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Critical Analysis of My Portfolio

Looking back on the past four years I have found a few central themes running through my progression to becoming an educator. I have learned the value in creating environments that empower children, striving to create equity among all students, and creating equal educational opportunities. Above all, I have learned that none of these values can be achieved without investing myself as an educator to learn about each student as an individual. To teach most effectively I must know the ways my students work best, their struggles, their triumphs and everything in between. I know that for me this bond with a student comes out of working individually with each student and focusing on one-on-one relationships.

The first project in which I was able to convert my teaching ideology from haphazard thoughts into concrete ideals and values was when I wrote my educational philosophy. This was important to my progress as an educator because I was able to think back on my past teaching experiences and reflect on the aspects of each experience which I valued and found to be most effective and beneficial to students with whom I worked. The educational philosophy that I wrote focuses on Rodgers' (1969) ideas of experiential learning and self-initiated learning. Looking back I find that my philosophy is always growing and adapting. At the time I wrote my philosophy I was student teaching at the Mission Hill School in a substantially separate urban classroom with eight five and six year old students and one head teacher. The children had varying degrees of special needs, and most of them had emotional-behavioral disorders. Because I was in this practicum in Mission Hill at the time, the ideology and teaching methods of the

Mission Hill School were my strongest influences. Presently, as I have had more experiences in teaching as well as in my own education, I have adapted my philosophy based on my continued growth as an educator. I still believe in children's learning through experience, as was practiced in Mission Hill, but I have also seen the need for a balance between an open project-based learning atmosphere and a structured classroom environment. However, certain ideas such as educational equity and student empowerment continue to be values that are very important to me as an educator.

My practicum at Mission Hill was also an experience in which I learned a lot about myself as an educator. One of the most beneficial experiences over the past four years at Wheelock occurred because of my work on Self Study I and documenting one student's learning. Upon arriving at Mission Hill I was overwhelmed walking into a classroom with so much need. Amongst the chaos in the classroom there was one child who seemed to be lost. In a classroom where every student was crying for help through disruptive actions and behavior, he seemed to disappear behind the confusion. There would be many instances where he would get up and leave the classroom with no one to follow him; it was assumed that he would eventually come back. When he was in the classroom he rarely completed actual work and often he acted out verbally and physically. I decided to focus my self study on him, and, therefore, I had the opportunity to learn everything I could about this student. When he left the classroom I would follow. When he acted out, I would sit down and talk to him and counsel him about how he was feeling. It took a long time and a great personal investment from both of us, but eventually we created a bond. I learned that he was struggling socially because he did not know how to create relationships and that academically he was having a hard time

because he did not learn in the same ways as his peers. After learning all I could about his needs, through my self study I created a series of lesson plans focusing on social skills which developed into a curriculum that facilitated his social and academic growth.

Mission Hill led to many revelations for me. Most significantly it helped me completely reevaluate my goals. I entered Wheelock four years ago convinced that my ideal career would be teaching a classroom for preschoolers with autism, yet through my one-on-one work with my student I found the area in which I excel. As an educator I work best in a one-on-one situation where I can focus on one student, really getting to know him or her, and working to best suit the needs of that particular student. I feel most fulfilled when I can spend time to learn about a child in depth and discover what really works in order for that child to feel empowered, to reach for opportunities, and overall to be successful.

I was able to further explore working individually with students through my second practicum in Brookline. This was a unique classroom which was a small, structured setting for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. There were seven children with two teachers, one teacher assistant, and six teacher aides. Here I was put into the rotating schedule in which, throughout the fall semester I was able to work individually with different students in the classroom. I found this to be extremely satisfying and I felt as though I found my place.

Lastly, for my Capstone research paper I was able to learn in depth about an area of special education which I felt was important for me to explore. When deciding what to look at, I realized I had some loose ends to tie up in regards to my feelings about pilot school environments. Although Mission Hill was a great learning experience for me, it

was also a personal struggle. I had difficulty teaching in accordance with the philosophy of the school. My time in the school was made so challenging because I felt that the level of need in the classroom was not being resolved through the curriculum, resources, or overall ideology. I became invested in the progress of all of the children in the classroom. I created bonds with all of them, which made it harder to see the function of the classroom. Thus, I decided that for my research paper I wanted to understand the ideas behind pilot schools such as Mission Hill including the success rate in regards to special education. What I found was that my experiences were not unique. Pilot schools have success in regards to regular education, yet I found that there are many problems with special education in pilot schools. I felt satisfied to know that others shared my experiences, but it is also disheartening. It is demoralizing to think of the children I left in an environment which is probably not the most effective place for them to excel. I now have a career goal to help children in situations like those with whom I worked at Mission Hill.

Over the past years at Wheelock I have learned a lot about myself and grown personally as well as professionally. I realize looking back that although I am a teacher, I am also a student. Over the last four years I have learned through my teaching experiences that I will continue to learn over the course of my career. I am prepared for what is to come after graduation. I have redefined my career goals to suit the environment in which I can work most successfully, and I am ready to continue my education and fulfill my goals in special education. I have decided that, in view of the fact that I do work best with a child when we are working one-on-one, I will be looking into different areas of therapy to specialize. Right now I am very interested in a possible

career in counseling where I can focus on individualized relationships with students. I will continue to gain knowledge as I move further in my career as an educator and extend my experience into different settings of special education.